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ABSTRACT

In an effort to reduce the number of dropouts in a Florence, South Carolina school system, an experimental English curriculum focusing on reading skills and attitudes toward school was created. The participating students were uninterested in education beyond high school and accustomed to low achievement in school work. Learning activities in the program were selected to capture student interest and to generate experiences of success. For students with problems in basic skills, for example, activities for building oral language, reading, writing, and listening skills included mock job interviews, taping of conversations, newspaper reading, vocabulary study from standard forms, advertisements and signs, paperback reading, journal writing, free-response writing, and discussions of current popular issues. Methods of grading and evaluation were revised. Results of reading skill tests showed that the program was successful in improving reading skills, and principals from the high schools attributed a lower dropout rate to the success of the program. (AL)

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Developing a Language Arts Program For The Nonacademic Adolescent

by

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Developing a Language Arts Program For

The Nonacademic Adolescent

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Introduction

In the past few years much has been said and much has been written about developing a secondary English curriculum relevant to today's teenager. Innovations described as panaceas for improving instruction have come to the forefront. Team teaching, individualized instruction, programmed learning, modular scheduling, and instructional television are but a few of the terms being used today to describe transitions in curriculum development. None of these will be effective unless schools consider the needs, interests, attitudes and values of today's teenagers as curriculum decisions are made.

As long as studies show that approximately 750,000 of the nation's youngsters annually drop out of school before high school graduation, schools must admit that current programs are not relevant and fail to tap the talents and resources that lie dormant in thousands of young people.

With the high relationship between dropouts and reading abilities, with the widely varying abilities within the classrooms, and with the increasing lack of interest in reading among young people, the big question is: What can the middle schools and secondary schools do to cope with these problems?

In attempting to answer this question, I would like to tell you a story of academic success enjoyed by nonacademic teenagers in a secondary language arts program. In this story, nonacademic students are those who find

academic achievement difficult and who are not primarily interested in furthering their education beyond high school.

The four senior high schools (grades 9-12) and four junior high schools (grades 7-8) in the story are a part of the Florence Public Schools, Florence, South Carolina. Located in the tobacco belt of South Carolina, the district includes the city of Florence, population 62,000, and the outlying agricultural and industrial sections. The total school enrollment of 15,000 students comes from various socio-economic levels ranging from very low to high middle class families.

Recognition of the need

As early as 1954 the school administration, having recognized the need for the teaching of reading beyond the elementary level, put into effect various procedures which did not produce the hoped-for success. A remedial reading program initiated in the junior high schools included 30 classes with seven teachers. Of the 1440 nonacademic students in grades 7, 8, and 9, 600 or 41.7 per cent received remedial reading instruction. The aim of the remedial reading program was to help students who were retarded two years in reading. In the 8th grade, the instructional material was on the 6th grade level. The basic English curriculum was modified by replacing the literature book with another on one reading level below the actual grade level but the grammar book was the same as that used by the academic students.

The results of 1967 testing of non-academic students in grades seven through ten revealed a wide range of reading abilities within the classroom and emphasized the inadequacy of the existing English and reading programs.

Preliminary planning

In January of 1968, the state supervisors of English and reading, secondary principals, guidance counselors, reading teachers, and English teachers were invited to discuss plans for developing a coordinated program of English and reading. Attendance was voluntary and some came only one time. Those, who realized the irrelevance of the existing English program, discussed the need for developing a language arts curriculum based on levels of achievement rather than traditional grades.

Preliminary planning included developing a philosophy, setting up tentative objectives, studying the trends in teaching English, scheduling teacher-training programs, and previewing, evaluating and selecting instructional materials.

The extent of participation in each school was left to the discretion of the principal. Requests were received from five junior high schools for the establishment of 38 classes with 21 teachers. One senior high school, which had expressed a serious concern over the inability of students to perform in the prescribed English curriculum, was selected for a special study. In 1968-69, there were approximately 1100 students in the program with 24 teachers working with them.

Teacher selection and preparation

Teachers were chosen because of their interest in and desire to participate in the program. Formal educational qualifications for them included certification in English; or, for those teaching in grades seven and eight, certification in elementary education or English. Courses in reading were desirable.

At a five-day workshop in August, Dr. Harold Herber, Syracuse University, and the state supervisors of English and reading discussed problems faced by classroom teachers in adjusting methods and materials to the needs of students. Each year a workshop for the participating teachers has been held prior to the opening of school. Dr. Paul Berg, University of South Carolina, and Uberto Price, Appalachian State University, have worked with the groups on curriculum development.

Philosophy and objectives

The philosophy undergirding the development of a language arts curriculum for nonacademic teenagers must be one that has as its basic concern the psychological needs of the individual student---his ability, interests, attitudes, self-concept, cultural values, and goals. It must also be a philosophy of acceptance---accepting the teenager where he is on the learning continuum including his dialect, his reading level, his ability to write, and his rate of learning.

Students need to experience success and feel a sense of involvement in the total academic program rather than being designated as basic English students and remedial readers. Having a sense of belonging greatly improves attitudes.

One of the English teachers summed up the philosophy that must exist in a successful program in this way, "Before we can teach nonacademic teenagers, we must let them know we care about them and their problems. They need warmth and understanding from us and they need to know that we accept them as they are."

After the philosophy has been clearly formulated and understood, realistic objectives must be established. Teachers set the following overall ob-

jectives for the Florence language arts program:

1. To help each student realize he can succeed.
2. To teach students that communication skills are important.
3. To teach students that reading is enjoyable.
4. To teach students to think; to make intellectual choices and decisions; and to become more independent learners.
5. To strive to meet individual needs of all students.
6. To teach students and not pages of books.

Phases of the curriculum

Different types of curriculum organization were studied and discussed. It was obvious that the framework of the new language arts curriculum must be built around the achievement levels of students rather than traditional grade requirements. Based on results of previous testing, the language arts curriculum was organized around seven phases of achievement.

Phases of Language Arts Program

Phase	Reading Grade Level
I	R-3
II	4-5
III	5-6
IV	6-7
V	7-8
VI	8-9
VII	9-10

Each phase provides a flexible learning situation directly related to the achievement of the student and his learning rate rather than to

the traditional requirements of the grade to which he has been promoted. A student who learns at a slow rate will remain in a phase indefinitely, even a year or more, while others move quickly through the phases. Students may move from one teacher to another if their needs can be more adequately met in another group.

In a multiphased curriculum all students are scheduled according to where they are on the learning continuum rather than by number of years in school, chronological age, and grade promotion, which are characteristics of the lock-step graded school. Students from different grade levels are grouped together according to achievement. This has posed no problem since student needs, interests, and abilities overlap chronological ages and grade levels. Classes are scheduled for two-period time blocks each day. Senior-high students receive one unit for English and one for remedial reading toward their graduation course requirements.

Developing the curriculum

A course of study, based upon the above outlined philosophy and objectives, was developed for each phase of the curriculum. The communication skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are taught as components of the total language arts program instead of in isolation. The following framework is intended to establish guidelines and provide for sequence and continuity in the curriculum.

Needs of teenagers. Needs refer to the developing psychological feelings, interests, and purposes in a child's life dictated by the society in which he lives. Language behavior develops as the student

needs to communicate his feelings, interests, and motivations to others. The communication skills cannot develop outside the mediation of social interaction. Therefore, how language develops is directly related to this interaction. The teacher's role becomes that of understanding the diverse cultural needs---anxieties, frustrations, interests, motivations--- and creating a classroom environment appropriate to channeling these diverse needs toward appropriate ways of behavior whether reading for survival or writing to inform.

Goals to be accomplished. Goals refer to those language modifications which the student is led to make through social pressures of the classroom environment. Goals are the socially acceptable language behaviors; he accepts the goal to listen, rather than to be inattentive; he accepts the goal of reading orally to a group, rather than of mute withdrawal; he accepts the goal to expand his language, rather than to experience social rejection.

Skills to be developed. Skills refer to the parts of a task which, when learned, make up proficient behavior for the whole task. For example, the behavior known as "speaking" includes many skills: voice, tone, pitch, enunciation, correct pronunciation, etc. Skills of a particular behavior may be taught separately but the learner must be constantly aware of the completed task for which the sub-skill is a part.

Methods of instruction. Methods refer to the teaching procedures used in meeting the needs of individual students. It is how a teacher uses materials or develops skills. Since different students learn in different ways, alternate instructional methods should be included in the curriculum.

Materials to be used. Materials refer to commercial or teacher-made devices which contain exercises and activities for the learning of one or more skills. To meet the individual needs of all students, extensive basic and supportive materials must be made readily available.

Assessment and evaluation. Evaluation refers to the measures used to determine the degree to which goals have been reached. This is usually done by assessing separate skills through objective evaluation, using standardized tests, or subjective evaluation using teacher observation, checklists, etc. Since the established goals are student-centered, the evaluation procedures are centered around individual student achievement of the language arts skills.

Each of the six components are necessary parts of the framework of a comprehensive language arts curriculum. No one component can be isolated from the others. Each one, from the needs of the teenager to the evaluation, must be interrelated to provide a coordinated program of studies.

Illustrating curriculum content

The framework, described above, was used to develop the course of study for each of the communication skills in each phase of the curriculum. Time does not permit an explanation of this procedure for all the phases, therefore, I have elected to illustrate the development of curriculum content by using Phase I. This phase of the curriculum is designed for students who find listening, speaking, reading and writing quite difficult and have serious problems with basic skills.

Developing listening skills. Nonacademic students, achieving on a primary level, need to realize that learning can come through listening and success can be experienced through listening. Goals to be accomplished include acquiring the ability to distinguish between correct and incorrect speech patterns, broadening experiential backgrounds, and fostering language development as a result of a listening experience. These teenagers need to increase skill in auditory discrimination, to listen to directions and follow them, and to listen and recall events in a sequence.

To develop listening skills, opportunities are given students to hear, listen, and understand through class and small group discussions; teachers' explanations; conversations; dramatizations; oral reports; recordings; listening skill tapes; coordinated books, records, and filmstrips; phonic tapes; educational television; and use of the Language Master. Other approaches place emphasis on listening to background music while writing, listening to oral reading by students and teachers, playing listening games, completing listening exercises in labs. After a poem is read or a record played, students are encouraged to listen and picture in their minds what they hear, and relate it to the class. Various sounds and voices, in and out of the classroom, are recorded and then identified.

Change in behavior can be evaluated through teacher observation and peer reaction. Improvement in speech patterns, the ability to follow directions, the ability to answer questions on oral reading, and the development of pride in learning through listening indicate that goals have been accomplished.

Developing oral language skills. In order for students to feel secure in expressing their thoughts orally, teachers must accept their

dialects and oral language patterns. Some students need to expand their own language, to develop speech patterns socially acceptable to the locale, and to realize that different levels of usage are used for different occasions. Acquiring the ability to use a telephone properly, to communicate with a prospective employer, and to converse with peers and adults without fear of being misunderstood are important to these youngsters.

Oral language skills are improved by providing experiences for talking, talking, talking. Through role playing, e.g., portraying teenage problems, simulating telephone conversations and interviews for employment, opportunities are given for oral expression. Rather than having students memorize the rule that a subject must agree with its verb, oral sentence pattern drills are used. Students, grouped by pairing, practice language development by using teacher-made oral sentence pattern drills, oral language practice books, and oral reading to partners.

Other activities include choral reading and echo reading, taping conversations and listening to their own usage and pronunciations, practicing acceptable pronunciations on Language Master, retelling stories, recording different dialects within the class or school, and compiling slang dictionaries.

The degree of oral language improvement is evaluated by comparing short taped conversations of students recorded at the beginning and at the end of the year. Another technique is to simulate two to three minute interviews where students strive to converse in socially acceptable language.

Developing skills for reading. The reading levels of Phase I students range from nonreaders to fourth-grade level. Year by year, they have been traditionally promoted. By the time they reach the secondary school,

many teachers will quickly tell you that Sammie can't read now, probably never will, and should never have been promoted. Their reading deficiencies make them potential dropouts.

First, these teenagers need to realize the practicality of learning to read better, that to acquire important information it is necessary to master basic reading skills. Although their reading progress is very slow, they need to receive genuine praise and to be treated as adolescents, not children.

Reading goals are those necessary for survival in society. Emphasis is placed on life-related activities such as reading newspapers; using telephone directories; obtaining a social security card; filling out forms; interpreting credit, savings, and interest rates; writing checks; and understanding driver regulations, road maps, and highway signs.

A language-experience approach is used with nonreaders. They dictate stories about their own experiences to a classmate who is the "secretary." The vocabulary is in their vernacula and is "real" to them, whereas, many of the commercial materials are not in the realm of their experiences. Phrases of a "survival" vocabulary such as "one way street," "emergency exit," or "speed checked by radar" are practiced on a Language Master.

Special vocabulary terms found on standard forms, e.g., "maiden name," "past employment," "education," "confidential," are learned in class discussions. Practical application of these terms is made by having students fill out job, insurance, accident and selective service forms. After comparing prices in newspaper ads, students are given an opportunity to practice check writing by filling out "mock" checks in payment for the week's groceries. Teenagers learn to fill out money orders, send telegrams, apply for credit, and start savings accounts.

Another activity used to extend vocabulary is having each student make a cumulative list of words that is of personal interest to him. For some boys, the lists may include hot rods, drag racing, surfing, soul music, names of cars, e.g., "Cougar," "Mustang," and "Charger." For the girls, you may find words as dating, romantic, mini or midi skirts, make-up, and fashions. Card files may include an accumulation of words that will be useful in a selected vocational field; terms from radio, television, and films; words describing a hobby; and troublesome words in social studies, science, and math.

Multiple skilltexts on various levels of difficulty, skilltapes, commercial and teacher-made games, and multi-level labs are used in building and reinforcing reading skills. The newspaper is one of the most relevant and cheapest "textbooks" that can be used to "turn on" nonacademic teenagers. Some will be able to recognize only an occasional word in a headline, on the sports page, or in a comic strip. The possibilities of using the newspaper as a tool to teach vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling are unlimited.

One of the most important aspects of the reading program, and one which is often overlooked, is that of inspiring nonacademic teenagers to read just for the fun of reading. Thousands of books, mostly paperbacks carefully selected on all reading and interest levels, are made available through classroom libraries.

Developing composition skills. The nonacademic teenager needs to know that his written thoughts will be warmly accepted, regardless of length and correctness of form. He must be able to feel that what he has to say is important, that it will be understood, even if he has to

read it to the teacher. Writing something down on paper must come first, before activities to improve writing can begin.

Goals are to get the student to write, to overcome his fear of writing, to improve his ability to express himself clearly, and to feel independent and self-confident.

In the Florence program, no formal grammar books are used. The philosophy of learning to write through the practice of writing is emphasized. A student is permitted to express his thoughts without the fear of being critized orally or having his paper covered with red marks. Teachers often ask students to help find their errors, concentrating on only one kind of error at a time. Mechanics and the improvement of usage are taught by correcting errors made by students, not from memorizing grammar rules or filling in blanks in a sentence.

How can students who have few basic writing skills be motivated to want to write? Have them write about personal experiences, about the life they actually know. Relaxed, unpressured writing activities, as in journals, give teenagers opportunities to express their thoughts without fear of criticism. Class discussions about topics of current interest, e.g., drugs, peace in Vietnam, dating, marriage, sports, are directed to a point where everyone wants to talk. Then, students are asked to put their thoughts into writing.

Magazine pictures, cartoons, paintings, recordings, films, filmstrips, transparencies, unfinished stories, and startling sentences are used as stimuli for free-response writing. Expository efforts such as writing a short paragraph on "How to Teach a Dog Tricks" or "How to Apply Make-up" are utilized. Pretending "If I were," for instance a pencil, a piece of chewing gum or "Dear Abbey," motivates some students to express their thoughts. Some are interested in writing simple radio or television scripts.

Developing a curriculum guide

As the program progressed, there was a need for the development of an operational guide to define more clearly the objectives and to coordinate the program of studies in the different phases. Language arts teachers with the assistance of Dr. Paul Berg, University of South Carolina, suggested the format, using the six components of the curriculum as guidelines.

Worksheets, listing each element, each language arts skill and each phase, were developed. Teachers were asked to write suggestions as to how the goals could be achieved, based upon the needs. Departmental meetings and workshops provided opportunities for teachers to assimilate worksheets and discuss them as a group. A questionnaire was used to get ideas and to discover teachers with special interest areas. Representatives from each school were given released time to work with Dr. Berg.

Teachers, using these worksheets, make practical suggestions for effective instruction, recommend changes, then, return the guides at the end of the year. They are reprinted after necessary changes are made. The writing is a continuous process, not a specific project, and will never be finished. Learning, for teachers, takes place through actual participation.

Methods of reporting

The secondary English report card was revised, omitting numerical grades, changing the wording for each letter grade, and adding space for teacher comments. Students are graded according to the progress they are making on their instructional level. Quality points are given for a letter-grade according to the phase the student is in.

Students progress in basic materials at various rates and different supplementary materials are used for different students. These factors necessitate students' progress cards, showing results of reading tests and English evaluations and progress in materials. Data are filed in cumulative records.

Analysis of data

Pre-testing and post-testing on the vocabulary and comprehension parts of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test are used. Significant gains in these reading areas are determined by t tests.

A writing sample is used in pre-testing and post-testing and the data statistically treated. Pictures as these are used as stimuli for free writing samples. The compositions are evaluated on a 1-9 point rating scale on seven components including sentence sense, complexity of structure, surface conventions, vocabulary, frequency of stylistic devices, clarity of expression and content.

At the beginning of the year, some students are able to write only a few words or sentences. Later they write longer compositions with more clarity of expression.

Concomitant results

Although statistical data strongly supports the worth of the program, concomitant results further emphasize its effectiveness.

After years of failure and frustration, many students experienced academic success. When one eighth-grade boy received his report card, he jumped out of his desk and exclaimed, "I've been coming to school eight years and this is the first time I ever made a B!" Grading

students on their own achievement made these grades possible.

One senior-high student, temporarily suspended because of an accumulation of demerits, appeared at the door of the language arts class with a forged admission slip. When the teacher did not admit him, he pleaded, "Please let me come in and finish my book about Helen Keller. I like that lady."

Many students openly expressed their dislike for reading. After several weeks, classroom libraries afforded the most popular activity of the program. Students hid books so no one could get "my book."

Concensus of the principals was that the program reduced the number of dropouts. Only one-fourth of the dropouts in the involved schools were in the program; three-fourths were in other English programs.

One principal summarized the feelings of the personnel involved when he said, "We usually have about forty dropouts by Thanksgiving. We have not had a single one this year. Now I know they were 'runouts.' We run them away from school with the type classes we put them in."

Summary

The success achieved by each individual is the measure of how relevant and meaningful is the curriculum for today's nonacademic teenager. Lower absentee and dropout rates, fewer discipline problems, improved attitudes toward education in general are all positive evidences that an innovative English curriculum, concerned with psychological as well as academic needs, is more appropriate for the youth of the seventies.